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# Roots of Conflict: The First World War and the Political Fragmentation of the Middle East

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# Roots of Conflict

## The First World War and the Political Fragmentation of the Middle East

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Major Tom Seal, U.S. Marine Corps

**W**ITH IRAQ'S INVASION of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 a new dimension of conflict was added to the already volatile Middle East. While the world has grown accustomed to armed conflict between Israel and the frontline Arab states, inter-Arab rivalries, and even to brutal internecine struggles like that in Lebanon, Iraq's forceful annexation of Kuwait was a fundamentally different phenomenon. The overt aggression by one Arab state to absorb another has not been seen since the consolidation of Saudi Arabia in the 1920s. The Iraqi attack shattered the myth of Arab unity, opened Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to an unprecedented level of Western influence, and cast a pall of uncertainty over the region.

Generally attributed to the chauvinism and ruthless opportunism of one man, the roots of the recent Gulf conflict run much deeper. Like every other war in the modern Middle East, this one can be traced back along multiple lines: religious, economic, cultural, and political. If you trace these lines far enough you find that they intersect in one momentous era, that of the First World War. That war and the peacemaking that followed created the modern Middle East. They also created a wealth of problems which have beset the region ever since. This article will outline very briefly some of the key issues and decisions of that era to show how they impact on events in the region today and to suggest how those same unresolved problems will serve as signposts for the future of the Middle East.

### Imperial Legacies

The political map of the Middle East was vastly different in 1914 than it is today. None of the states with which we are familiar existed as independent

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political entities. Instead, the Middle East was the none too stable meeting place of four empires: British, Russian, Ottoman (Turkish), and Persian. The British and Russian empires were, in 1914, vibrant and expanding. In contrast, by the early twentieth century Persia had ceased to be a serious player in regional politics. The Ottomans were still an important regional force, but just barely. Declining in power and influence for some 250 years, the shock and destruction of the World War would be the final undoing of the Ottoman Turks.

This meeting of the four empires was critical in defining the shape of the modern Middle East. Centuries of conflict between Ottomans and Persians contributed to an extremely pluralistic and unstable border region, a region which would later become Iraq. Similarly, a long and bloody series of conflicts divided the Ottoman Turks and the Russians. Imperial Russia had long coveted an outlet to the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, and maintained steady pressure against the Turks to achieve that goal. The Russians also pressed southward into Persia, threatening Afghanistan as well. Quite naturally the Turks, Persians, and Afghans opposed these advances. In the nineteenth century they gained an ally in Great Britain, who became increasingly worried over the security of British India and the lines of communication to that most important possession.

The formation of European alliances before the First World War inevitably had an impact on the Middle East. The growing danger posed by Germany led Britain and her long-time imperial rival, Russia, into an alliance in 1907. To cement the agreement and prevent an inadvertent collision between the still wary allies, the remains of the Persian Empire were divided into spheres of influence. Persia was split into a Russian zone in the north, a British zone in the south, and a rump Persian buffer zone sandwiched between. Britain also gained control of the foreign affairs of Afghanistan, thus excluding Russian influence there and canceling any immediate threat to India from that quarter. The Turks, long dependent on British aid in turning back the Russian tide, now cast their lot with Germany.

### The Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire of 1914 was far from robust. Her problems stemmed largely from peculiarities in the Ottoman method of administration, some of which bear directly on our story. First, there was confusion in the chain of command. The empire was nominally ruled by the Sultan. A hereditary ruler, by 1914 the Sultan had little real political power. But the Sultan was also Caliph, titular leader of the Moslem faith. The Caliph had several important powers, which included sole authority to call a Jihad (holy war) and to appoint custodians of the holy cities. Each of these powers would become a factor in Britain's approach to the Arabs in fomenting revolution against the Turks. Actual political

power was, after 1908, in the hands of the Committee of Union and Progress, better known as the Young Turks.

Another critical problem facing the Ottoman Empire was the absence of internal cohesion. There were many forces at work to split the empire, but several emerge as key. First was the ethnic problem. The often uneasy mix of Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Persians, Jews, and many other minorities periodically spilled over into violence as one group sought advantage over another. This was particularly true after the European powers began to seek clients among the minorities in the nineteenth century. Second, the ethnic groups were themselves split among different tribes and clans, which were oftentimes at odds with each other. Third, there was an ongoing uneasiness between nomad and town dweller.

The final problem was that of religion. There were Jews and a wide variety of Christian sects throughout the empire, but the majority of the population was Moslem. Moslems are historically tolerant of other religions, but are not always so open-minded when dealing with the many divergent Islamic theologies. Islam is divided into two major branches, Sunni and Shia. Most Persians and some Arabs are Shiite, a sect which split from the mainstream of Islam some 1,300 years ago. Most Arabs are Sunni, or orthodox Moslems. Each of the two major branches are further fragmented by a variety of different movements and schools of law. The conservative Wahhabi sect, an eighteenth century Sunni movement which is dominant in Saudi Arabia today, is a prominent example of this. The Druze of Lebanon and Alawai of Syria are just two of the many splinter groups which stem from the Shia movement.

The diverse political situation within the Arab portions of the Empire in 1914 led to complications. Some regions were occupied by European powers, some were in various stages of rebellion, and others had yet to feel the stirrings of nationalism and were quiet. Regardless, Ottoman control was always tenuous and local governors sometimes had a great deal of autonomy. Going clockwise around the map (Map 1) the situation was far from encouraging from the Ottoman point of view. In Mesopotamia, three villayetts, or provinces, made up what is now modern Iraq. Each was under separate administration. The northernmost, Mosul, was primarily Kurdish. Baghdad Villayett was primarily Arab, but was split between Sunni and Shia Moslems. Much of the population of Baghdad city itself was Jewish. In the south, Basra Villayett was largely Shia Arab. There was no nationalist movement in Mesopotamia at this time, and certainly no concept of an Iraqi nation.

Moving south to the Persian Gulf, Kuwait was nominally part of the Empire. Actually, the Sabah family had ruled since the eighteenth century; Britain had made Kuwait a protectorate in the closing years of the nineteenth century. The littoral area from Qatar in the Persian Gulf to Aden on the Arabian Sea, once a haven for pirates and potentially a base for rival (German) naval operations, was

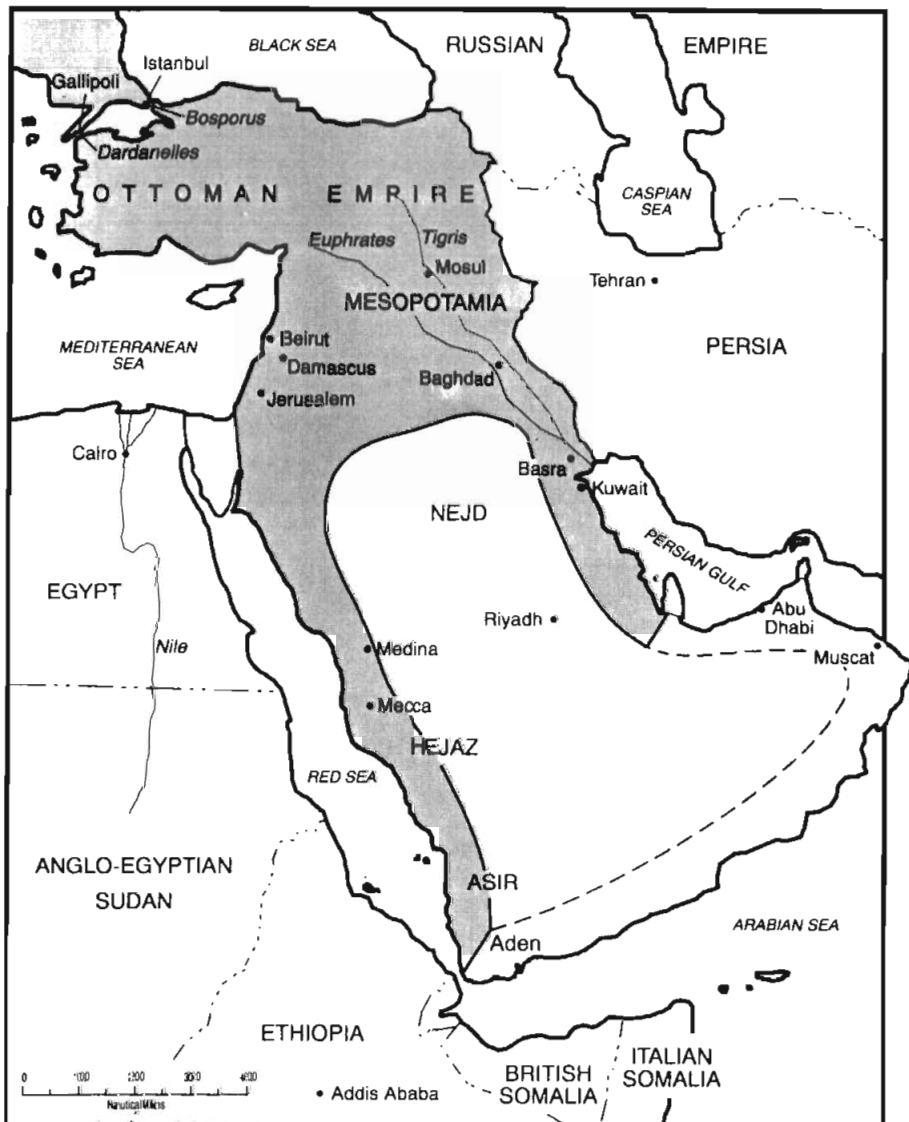
also under British protection. For the price of subsidies to native rulers, the British obtained the right to determine the foreign policies of these principalities, thus eliminating a potential threat to her control of the sea routes to India.

Political administration on the Arabian peninsula, less the British protectorates, was largely confined to two major power centers. In the east was the Nejd, ruled by Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, founder of modern Saudi Arabia. Seizing power in 1902, Ibn Saud began his rebellion against Ottoman authority in 1913. Though the Nejd was impoverished, militarily weak, and beset with tribal rivalries, two events served to overcome these problems. First was the systematic settlement of nomads into agrarian villages. Beginning in 1912, this continuing pattern of resettlement was accompanied by a parallel indoctrination in the puritanical Wahhabi code of conduct. Second was the advent of British subsidies after the outbreak of the Arab revolt in June 1916. These subsidies provided the Saudis' only reliable source of hard currency. These factors increased the cohesion of Arabian society while providing the means to finance military operations. This transformation of Arabian society and infusion of wealth was rapidly translated into military power and ultimately led to Saudi domination of the Arabian peninsula.

In the west, on the Red Sea coast, lay the Hejaz. This area is important for its inclusion of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Sharif Hussein Ibn Ali was appointed by the Caliph to be Amir of Hejaz and custodian of the holy places. A direct descendant of Mohammad (thus the title Sharif and membership in the Prophet's Hashemite clan), Hussein governed the Hejaz, subject to Ottoman authority in Istanbul. But there was a problem. Appointed by the Sultan in his capacity as Caliph, Hussein's relations with the Young Turks, the real rulers of the empire, were quite bad. By 1914 Hussein was sensing that his days as Amir were numbered. It is unclear whether the British first approached Hussein, or if Hussein's son Abdullah suggested the idea of British support for an Arab revolt. Whatever the case, Hussein led the Hejaz into active rebellion in 1916.

Egypt's position in the world was unenviable at best. Nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt was "ruled" by a "khedive" who was an ostensible vassal of the Sultan. In fact the khedive was virtually independent of Ottoman political control. He was, however, not so free of the British. A nationalist revolt in 1882 led by army officers under Urabi Pasha prompted British intervention. A "temporary" occupation followed, ostensibly to quell anti-Western violence and restore order to Egypt's chaotic finances. Once ensconced in Egypt, however, the British found it difficult to leave. The occupation continued until 1914 when the war prompted the announcement of a formal British protectorate. While the khedive still occupied his palace, there could be no question as to where actual power rested.

As for the remainder of the Middle East, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria are ancient lands which bore little resemblance to the states which emerged from



Map 1

jerry lamothe

the postwar peace conferences. Israel (as separate from Palestine) did not exist and the very idea of a state of Jordan had yet to be born. Ottoman administration in these areas was like that of Mesopotamia, centered on villayetts (Damascus, Aleppo, Lebanon, . . .) and largely autonomous religious enclaves scattered throughout the mountainous regions of Palestine and Syria. Western influences, primarily French and American, were much in evidence in Beirut and its environs.

## War

In the autumn of 1914 Britain dispatched a force from India to the Persian Gulf to protect the flow of oil from Persia. War between Great Britain and Turkey began on 5 November, followed by a British attack on Turkish fortifications on the Fao peninsula the following day. Within three weeks Basra was in British hands. Thus began the first of three major British Middle Eastern campaigns.

The Mesopotamian Campaign kicked off in earnest the spring of 1915. A British-Indian army under Major General Charles Townshend moved toward Baghdad, only to be besieged at Kut el-Amara. Townshend surrendered his entire army in April 1916. This reverse was paralleled by the year-long disaster at Gallipoli which came to a close in January 1916. Things went better for Britain in 1917. Baghdad fell to a force under General Maude in April, while General Allenby's army entered Palestine, capturing Jerusalem in December. Damascus fell in October 1918. British advances in Palestine and Syria were aided by a brilliant guerrilla campaign by Arab irregulars under Feisal, son of the Sharif Hussein. Feisal was ably assisted by T. E. Lawrence, the legendary Lawrence of Arabia. In stark contrast to their very real successes at Kut and Gallipoli, Turkish offensives against Russia in the Caucasus and British Egypt in the early years of the war were poorly planned, badly executed, and ineffectual.

With the end of Turkish resistance in late 1918, the thoughts of the allies turned to consolidating their gains and instituting civil administration in the occupied territories. A number of factors complicated this process. The most immediate was the actual disposition of forces. Wartime agreements among the allies had arranged for many specific details. One such detail was that, in deference to Arab-Moslem sensibilities, Feisal's army would enter Damascus first. It didn't. The unanticipated early collapse of Ottoman authority in the city caught Feisal several days' march from Damascus. British forces were nearer and moved in to fill the vacuum. Thus, an opportunity for Feisal, the king designate, to establish immediately his administration and found a unified Arab kingdom in Greater Syria was lost. French forces were on the ground in what is now Lebanon and were moving toward Damascus. British forces were strung out throughout Palestine and Mesopotamia, with significant gaps in military control east of the Jordan River. While there was no organized threat from that quarter, there was no legal authority either. The result was a lawless situation on the fringe of important British interests, a state of affairs which could not long be ignored.

## Secret Agreements

The most significant factor complicating the reestablishment of political order in the region was the issue of the secret agreements between the allies for postwar

settlements. Concluded during the dark days of the war to further the allied cause and to give meaning to the war effort (through acquisition of territory), the agreements can be described as opportunistic, duplicitous, or shrewd, depending on your point of view. Anxious to win the support of Hussein, who they mistakenly viewed as a possible surrogate Caliph capable of rallying the Arabs to their cause and reducing the threat a Jihad by the Moslems in India would pose; the British provided gold, arms, and military advisors to Hussein. More importantly, in a series of letters between Hussein and Sir Henry McMahon, First High Commissioner for Egypt from July 1915 through January 1916, Britain promised an Arab kingdom which included Arabia (less Aden) plus what is now Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. The disposition of Lebanon would wait for the end of the war.

Simultaneously with this Hussein-McMahon correspondence, Sir Mark Sykes of the Arab Bureau and M. Francois George Picot of the French foreign office concluded another agreement on the division of the spoils in the Middle East. Under the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Lebanon and Mesopotamia were placed under direct French and British rule, respectively. Palestine was defined as that area between Lebanon and Sinai and west of the Jordan River. It was to be under international control. The remainder of the region was to be divided into French and British zones of influence where these powers would exercise commercial and administrative ascendancy. There was no provision for the Arab kingdom promised Hussein by McMahon.

Ranking with the secret agreements in the turmoil which it generated was the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Issued by Lord Balfour, the British foreign secretary, the declaration announced Great Britain's support for the establishment of a Jewish "national home" in Palestine. There were, however, several problems with this. First, there was no definition of national home. Was this entity meant to be a Jewish state, an enclave in an Arab state, or something else? Second, the borders of Palestine were not defined. There were to be several attempts at drawing boundaries, none of which reflected local cultural, historical, and political realities. Finally, though the rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine were guaranteed, these communities were not consulted. Nor did they have any confidence in British guarantees. The vagueness of the declaration invited interpretation and, inevitably, every interested party interpreted it differently. The result was mistrust, confusion, and violence.

## Settlements

The postwar boundaries of the Middle East bear a strong resemblance to the Sykes-Picot agreement. Refinements to that agreement took place over several years, with the bulk of the wartime boundary issues being settled by 1922. Without going into detail on those agreements, what follows is a brief outline of just how the modern Middle East took shape. (Map 2)

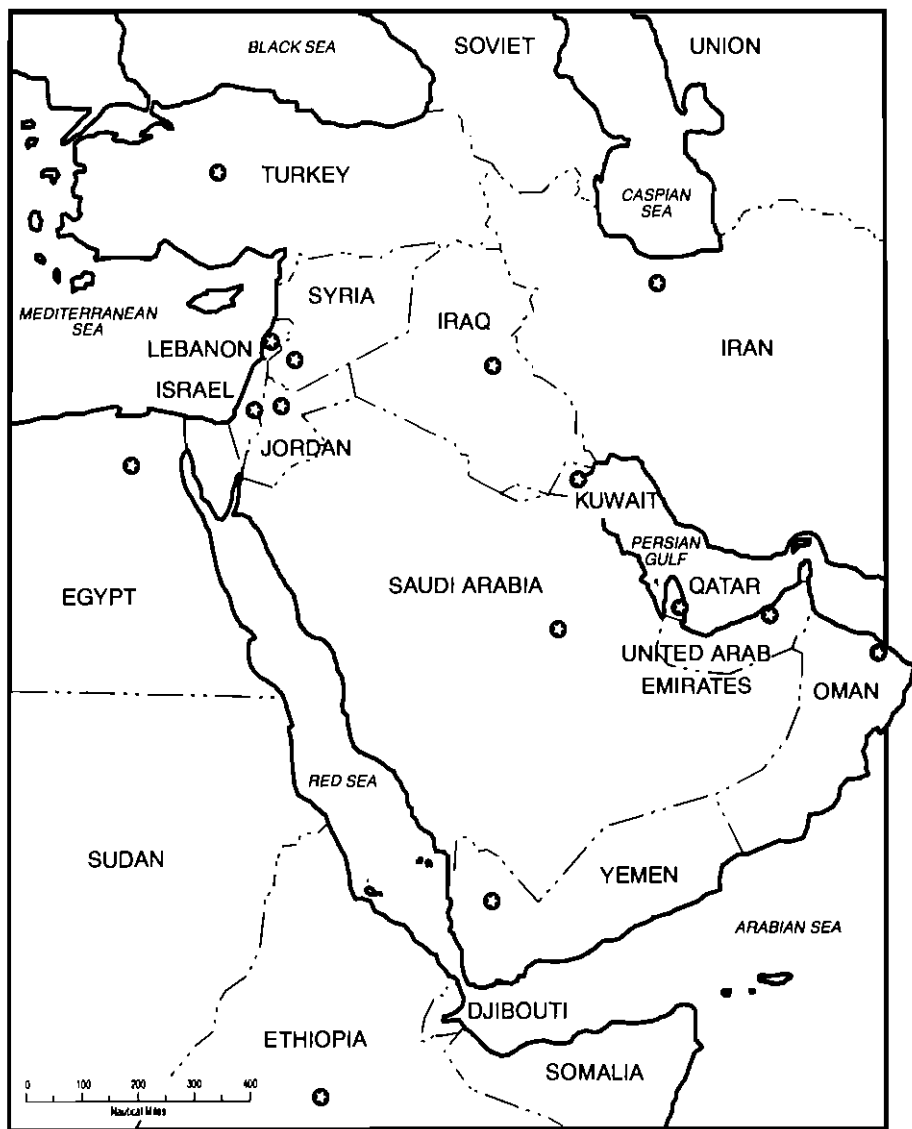


When Feisal finally led his Arab army into Damascus, he vied for authority with the Arab factions already entrenched within the city. His immediate departure to attend the Paris Peace Conference prevented Feisal from imposing the degree of personal control necessary to ensure a smooth transition from Turkish to Arab administration. In the midst of this turmoil British troops were pulled out of Syria in November 1919, leaving Feisal to come to terms with the French. He was unable to meet the stringent French demands and was forced into exile in July 1920. Once in full control of Syria, the French created an expanded Lebanon as a separate state. By implication, the strong French presence in Syria and their demonstrated willingness to use force in expanding French influence posed a threat to the British, who were demobilizing at such a pace as to raise fears of their ability to defend Britain's interests and to maintain order.

With Feisal dismissed from Syria, nationalist riots and unrest spreading in Egypt and Palestine, tribal rebellions growing in Mesopotamia, and a dwindling army, 1920 was a time of challenge for Britain. Continuing to back Feisal, the British installed him on the newly established throne in Iraq, formerly Mesopotamia. That fractious land was a state only in name. Mosul, the northernmost province, was supposed to have been part of an independent Kurdistan created by the peacemakers at Versailles. But the Kurds had many powerful enemies—Turks, Persians, and Arabs—and no champions, so an independent Kurdistan never got off the ground. The southernmost provinces were initially expected to be governed by British India, but that too became confused. Now in 1921 an Arab (Hejazi) king was being imposed by Great Britain on a divided land with little but Britain's rapidly diminishing military power to hold it together.

The result of this early attempt at nation-building was a very factionalized and unstable country where loyalties were on the tribal and clan levels and where there was little to bind the disparate elements of society into a cohesive whole. Iraq's history of coups, purges, and rebellions can be traced largely to the events of this era. The factionalism and violence of the era set the stage for the Baathist's rise to power in 1968, and ultimately for Saddam Hussein's attempts to create a nation (where no nation exists) through force, repression, and murder on a grand scale. Iraq gained formal independence and admission to the League of Nations in 1932.

The borders of Palestine were yet ill-defined in 1921, but included lands on both sides of the Jordan River. Entrusted by the League of Nations with the Palestine Mandate and the responsibility for implementing the Balfour Declaration there, the British were now having second thoughts. Having placed another of Hussein's sons, Abdullah, in temporary charge of Palestine east of the Jordan in 1921, it soon became apparent that this arrangement was incompatible with the terms of the Mandate. Having an Arab king over a Jewish homeland just wouldn't do. To rectify the situation the British redrew the boundaries.



Map 2

jerry lamothe

Under the revised Mandate the western boundary of Palestine was set on the Jordan River and the Arab state of Transjordan was formed in the east with Abdullah as king. Invented as an afterthought, Transjordan (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan after 1949) for many years proved to be one of the most prosperous and stable countries in the region.

In the Arabian Peninsula, Britain continued its subsidies to the littoral princes as well as to Hussein and Ibn Saud. The rivalry between the latter two flourished,

resulting in increased violence. Seeing himself surrounded by Hashemites after Abdullah was installed in Transjordan, Ibn Saud attempted to break an impending stranglehold by attacking Abdullah in 1922. His forces were turned back by British aircraft and armored cars before reaching Amman. A result of this action was the definition of borders between Saudi Arabia and her neighbors of Transjordan, Iraq, and Kuwait. Characteristically, the borders were drawn by Great Britain.

Tension between the Saudis and the Hashemites continued to grow over religious issues. Hussein's administration of the holy cities was marked by profiteering from the annual pilgrimage and the steady decline in the upkeep of the holy sites. This was particularly true in the postwar period after Britain withdrew subsidies to Hussein. The conservative Saudis were scandalized by this state of affairs in Hejaz. On a more practical note the Saudis could not be blind to the financial importance of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. Pilgrims spent money, expanding the local economy and adding to tax revenues collected by the state. Since oil had not yet been discovered in Arabia and the Nejd had no significant revenue-generating capacity, gaining control of Hejaz would be a financial boon for the Saudis. In 1924 Ibn Saud began the conquest of Asir, the land directly south of the Hejaz. This was quickly followed by an assault on the Hejaz itself. Saudi victory was complete and Ibn Saud named himself King of Hejaz in 1926. After a period of internal strife, Abd al Aziz Ibn Saud consolidated his control of modern Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Finally we return to Egypt. This ancient and proud nation had suffered many indignities, not the least of which was their grant of "independence" under a British installed king in 1922. In return for their so-called independence, the Egyptians conceded Britain's right to dictate Egypt's foreign policy and unlimited military use of Egyptian territory. British infringement of Egyptian sovereignty, specifically through military concessions, continued until the Suez crisis of 1956.

## Conclusion

Wars may or may not resolve the issues which caused them, but they invariably raise new ones or exacerbate the old. This was certainly the legacy of the First World War in the Middle East. By creating states where none had existed before, the victors of 1918 took a bold step in restructuring the region. Unfortunately, in creating those states too little care was given to the dynamics of the region. Borders were drawn with little regard to ethnic, economic, defensive, or dynastic realities, thereby sowing the seeds of future conflicts. From the immediate postwar Saudi campaigns to consolidate their power, through the coups, civil wars, and Arab-Israeli conflicts up to the Gulf War of today, the underlying struggle in the Middle East is one of legitimacy, the legitimacy of states, of the boundaries of those states, and of who shall rule them.

As we look beyond the yellow ribbons and the victory parades, we would do well to remember that the Gulf War solved none of the deep-seated problems that divide the region. The roots of the late conflict are still present, as are those of the Iran-Iraq War, the Lebanese Civil War, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Palestinian question. New problems will emerge as Saddam Hussein consolidates his power to oppose what he will inevitably term an unjust peace, and as the Gulf States struggle to redefine their roles in regional politics and the role of the ruling elites at home. The importance of Middle Eastern oil to our economy and security will only expand with time. Growing ethnic violence in the southern republics of the Soviet Union and the growing possibility of European backlash against the inroads of North African culture may add yet another dimension to the volatility of the region.

It is still too early to tell the ultimate outcome of the Gulf War, but of two things we can be certain. One is that the U.S. diplomatic and military focus will be on the Middle East for a long time to come. The other is that the tensions which divide the states of the region as a result of the First World War and its aftermath, and the tensions which divide the societies within those states, will continue unabated. Given these realities and the inevitable problems rising from the Gulf conflict, the more U.S. military planners know about the area, the more effective America will be in meeting her responsibilities there.

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Today, on a global scale, war has become a luxury that only poor nations can afford.

Zbigniew Brzezinski  
*Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1991